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THE READING OF CHARACTER FROM EXTERNAL SIGNS

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THE relations between general psychology and individual psychology are important and not hard to grasp. Neither can be separated from the other in practice, but each has its set of problems and its complement of special methods. The problems of general psychology concern the determination of laws and principles applying to the human animal generally, which are either independent of individual peculiarities or inclusive of these idiosyncrasies as definite combinations of general factors, not as exceptions. The problems of individual psychology, on the other hand, concern the discovery of those factors of difference between individuals; thus, ultimately, the description of the important respects in which each individual varies from other individuals, and in as far as classification is useful, the assigning of each individual to the class or classes in which he belongs. The specific methods of general psychology are included under the general term *experiment*; the methods of individual psychology under the term *mental measurement*. The most obvious relation between the two branches is through the fact that reliable mental measures (commonly called *mental tests*) can be developed only through experimentation of the most rigorous kind, and the fact that general principles can be obtained only by taking into account the individual differences of the various reactors on whom experimental work is done. One of the most unfortunate and harmful details of the present enthusiastic movement in the individual psychology, in education, in industry, and in medicine, is the naïve assumption that persons ignorant of general psychology and untrained in experimental psychology can develop and apply mental tests in a useful way without the careful supervision of competent psychologists. The deleterious results of such bungling work on children, for example, are apparent not only in the harm to the children and needless trouble and expense to which parents are put, but also in the prejudices aroused in the public mind against mental measurements as a result of the mistakes of amateurs. Equally unfortunate results are frequent in the legal, medical and industrial applications of amateur psychology. The general recognition of the need of individual psychology in commerce and industry in particular has led to the existence of a class of mere exploiters, many of whom reap large financial rewards from their practices, and whose eventual effect on the manufacturers and business men they victimize is to turn them against the application of real psychology.

Mental measurements have so far been developed to the point where effective determinations of general intelligence are made—determinations which are of value not only for schools and colleges, but also for commerce and industry. No psychologist claims that these measurements are completely satisfactory, and we all know that they are being constantly improved, and will be enormously improved in the future. On the other hand, no one but the psychologist knows the amount of time, labor and personal training required for the development and standardization of even the simplest test. The public, impressed by the apparent simplicity of the materials, assumes that any one can make up a test, and the public is right so far: any one *can* make up a test, and almost every one *does,* but the tests are not worth anything. The public either does not see this, or, if it does see it, assumes that the tests made up by the expert are also worthless. For some of the confusion the psychologists themselves are partly responsible. For example, the nomenclature of "mental ages" as established by intelligence tests, which should never have been allowed to escape from the laboratories, has very much confused and prejudiced the public.

In addition to tests of "general intelligence" (which may most safely be defined as that which standard intelligence tests measure), tests for special intellectual capacities have been developed. We can now measure ability to sustain and to distribute the attention, ability to perceive accurately details of various kinds, ability to learn, ability to avoid learning, and many other special abilities of this class. The field of such measurements is rapidly being extended, and it now requires merely the application of the labor of the trained psychologist to develop systematic tests for the special combinations of intellectual abilities required in any branch of any trade or profession.

But this is the limit to which mental measurements so far have extended. Emotional and moral characteristics are not as yet measurable. Yet we know that these characteristics are of immense importance in all the divisions of life in which we are measuring intellectual capacity. Even as concerns the candidate for admission to college, while it is important to determine his intellectual capacity, emotional and moral factors ought to be known. There is many a man who goes down or barely survives in college, whose intellectual ability is sufficiently good, but who will not work, or who will get into trouble because of moral delinquency, or whose scale of values is inadequate.

I do not say that we shall never be able to measure these characteristics by the methods of individual psychology; in fact, I think that ultimately we shall compass such measurement. A number of us are now at work on the problem of moral measurements, and I think the prospects for development along this line are favorable. But at present we do not pretend to make standardized measurements of emotional and moral capacity.

Wherever there is a great need, attempts to fill it will be made; these attempts will not all be scientific, and not all made in good faith, especially if there is a prospect of fat remuneration. The historical development of medicine is an illustration of this fact. Medical practice developed long before there was any known basis for it, and the bane of the medical profession to-day is the tendency to apply something in cases where there is really nothing to apply —a tendency against which Osler and other medical leaders have protested emphatically, and with some success.

The past lack of scientific means of measuring intelligence, and the lack of scientific means of measuring moral and emotional characteristics, together with the real need for such measures, has led to the development of unscientific methods of mental diagnosis which are popularly designated as *character analysis.* These methods are based on the assumption that there is a close relation between the anatomy of the individual and his mental characteristics, and that the details of this relationship may be discovered by casual examination, without the aid of statistical methods or experimental procedure, by persons ignorant not only of psychology but even of the rudiments of physiology.

The first systematic attempt at the development of character analysis was made by the phrenologists. The physiologist Gall early in the nineteenth century began to teach that the mental life is largely dependent upon the brain, especially upon the cerebral hemispheres. This fact was not widely recognized before the time of Gall, although it has become a commonplace since then, and Gall's work had a large influence in bringing this recognition about. But Gall and his disciples are also responsible for the introduction into psychology of several misleading conceptions concerning the relation of the brain to consciousness—conceptions which have retarded the development of psychology and which are being eliminated but slowly. Gall and his pupil Spurzheim developed a theory of the relation of the brain to mind which they called phrenology, which means literally the study of the intellect. These phrenologists believed that the different faculties or capacities of the mind were localized, each in specific portions of the cortex or outer surface of the cerebral hemispheres. They further believed that the relative development of each of these faculties depended upon the relative size of the portions of the brain in which the respective faculties were supposed to reside. Highly developed philoprogenitiveness, or love of children, for example, was supposed to depend upon a cortex relatively thicker in the philoprogenitive area than is the cortex in the same area of a person less strongly philoprogenitive. Finally, since they supposed the conformation of the skull to agree with the relative thickness of the cortex it encloses, they assumed the possibility of diagnosing the development of various cortical areas by examination of the outer surface of the cranium. The surface of the head was accordingly mapped off into a number of small areas, each associated with one of the faculties in the phrenological list; and from the relative depression or elevation of these areas the phrenologist attempted to read the "character" of the subject.

We need not dwell upon the series of bold assumptions involved in this system, since, from the scientific point of view, the system is of historical interest only. Quite aside from the further development of phrenology as a technique, it had a profound and on the whole unfortunate influence upon the course of psychobiology for many years. Physiologists and psychologists fell into the habit of assuming that consciousness is dependent upon brain activity in a remarkably simple way, ignoring the complicated interrelations of the various parts of the nervous system, and ignoring the fundamental function of the total nervous system in the control of movements through sensory stimulation. Moreover, both the psychologists and the physiologists accepted even the phrenological doctrine of the localization of conscious functions in specific parts of the cortex, although the functions as thus localized by the physiologists were not the "faculties" of the phrenologists, but a more generalized group, including the senses. It is only within the last fifteen years that psychologists have begun to reject the phrenological theory, and many physiologists still cling to it.

As an art, phrenology had a wide popular vogue and is still practiced lucratively in the United States, there being at least one school in which the system is taught. It has, however, sunk to a position of relatively minor importance, and has been largely supplanted by newer systems, in part derived from it, and in part derived from still older anatomical beliefs. In these newer systems little emphasis is placed upon the surface of the skull, the major stress being laid upon the contours of the face, upon the size and form of the nose, mouth, ears, brows and eyes, upon the color and texture of the hair, and upon similar anatomical traits.

In one of the most widely known systems, from which many other systems have been drawn, ''conscientiousness'' is indicated by a broad, bony chin; ''benevolence'' by a full, rolling, moist under lip; ''love of home'' by fullness of the soft part of chin just below the lip; ''amativeness'' by the thickness, moisture and redness of the central part of the upper lip; ''cautiousness'' by an extremely long nose; ''judgment'' by a broad, large nose; ''observation'' by a lowering of the brows at their inner ends and projection of the frontal bone at that point. Musical talent is indicated in this system by an ear of rounding form and fine quality, with a deep bell and perfectly formed rim. Mathematical ability is shown by squareness of the face bones, width between the eyes, and especially by the upward curve of the outer part of the eyebrow. The signs of acquisitiveness are a thick, heavy upper eyelid, with fullness and breadth of the nose just above the nostril. Sometimes an arched, curved or hooked nose indicates the same thing. But in this system the significance of many signs is modified by others; hence, the degree of development of a given characteristic is read, not from a single anatomical sign but from a group of anatomical details, to which I will apply the term *physiognomic pattern.* Thus, a certain relative form or size of one feature might indicate a certain mental trait, provided it is accompanied by certain other details of form, position and size of other features. Linguistic ability, for example, is shown by large bright convex eyes, fullness under the eyes, the rounding out of head above temples, full lips, full cheeks, full throat, wide mouth and chest, large nostrils, length from point of nose to tip of chin, with vertical, lateral and perpendicular width of concha of ear. The physiognomic pattern indicative of well-developed color sense is decided color of the complexion, eyes, eyebrows and hair, clearness of skin, and veins showing through.

By the use of patterns instead of single signs there is secured an elasticity of application of the system, which is of great importance, and to which I shall later refer.

The foregoing samples are drawn from a single system; but this system is one from which a number of variant systems have apparently been derived. There are many systems in use, all equally definite, all equally ''successful.'' Some systems stick pretty closely to physiognomy; some add signs from the voice, posture, and the anatomical details of arms, leg and trunk. But all these systems agree in two points: They are in the main anatomical, and they are lucrative to their promoters.

The attempts to read character from anatomical signs have not, however, originated in modern times, nor have they been confined to professional character analysts. Evidences of popular associations between anatomical details and especially between facial and mental and moral traits are to be found in the literature of all peoples. ''Let me have men about me that are fat,'' Shakespeare makes Cæsar say. Confluent eyebrows have long been supposed to be evidence of a lecherous disposition; a long nose of meddlesomeness; red hair of passion; and so on *ad infinitum.* As an attempt made in all seriousness to evolve a scientific system of mento-anatomy, I may point to Lombroso's description of the criminal type. It is evident that we have here to deal with tendencies which are widespread, and which are by no means always operating in the interests of private profit. Yet it is the professional character analyst who forms the main problem, since it is his work which furnishes the most pernicious results.

It requires little investigation to convince us that the systems of character analysis now in use have no scientific foundation, and that if any one of them were in part valid, it would be a most marvelous coincidence. None of the authors of the various modern systems shows any evidence of knowledge of physiology or psychology, to say nothing of genetics; nor do they attempt to apply even the simplest principles of statistics or experimental procedure in arriving at their conclusions. Naïve conclusions from selected cases at the best, mere guesses at the worst, are the sole means employed. A study of works on physiognomy strongly reminds the reader of the interpretations of the psychical researchers and the Freudians. Aside from this, the contradiction of system by system would give even the layman cause to doubt. If we consider the signs of the same character trait, such as ''honesty,'' we find it indicated in different systems by quite different signs. If we consider the same sign, such as the shape of the nose, we find it indicating quite different traits in different systems. And yet the claims of any one system to practical success are as well substantiated as are those of any other system.

Nevertheless, the incompetence of the existing systems does not dispose of the question whether there might not be a valid system evolved. In spite of the futile efforts of various would-be flyers, the airplane was invented. We must inquire therefore what possible basis there is for a system of character analysis based on anatomical signs. And we find the answer that there is no known basis on which such a system might be constructed.

We know that the exercise of mental and moral capacities does not change the gross anatomical details of the human being. (Some of the systems of character analysis assume the contrary.) That a man can not, by taking thought, add to his height is true, and is an illustration of a more general law. No exercise of generosity, judgment, musical talent, malice or amativeness can change the form of the nose, or of the ear, or the setting of the eyes, or the form of the brows. If training can not develop anatomical signs, then the putative signs of character must be signs of inherited capacity only, showing the endowment of the individual in respect to capacities which he may or may not have cultivated and developed.

But the results of genetics to date give us no basis for assuming anatomical signs of inherited capacity, except in pure races or relatively homogeneous races. It is true that we may conclude from such signs as the shape of the eyes and the color and texture of the hair that a certain individual belongs to the Chinese race, and hence that he has traits of character common to the Chinese. But the Chinese race, although not an absolutely pure race, is one which is sharply distinct from the white races, and we may expect to find different racial characteristics, although as a matter of fact the characteristics usually imputed to the Chinese are probably due more to training than to heredity. A Chinese boy, brought up under white conditions, is surprisingly like a white boy mentally, although he retains his anatomical race characteristics. In the case of the negro and of other markedly inferior races definite racial mental differences may be admitted. But we must remember that these differences are racial, not individual.

The European races, however, are exceedingly mixed, being the products of the blendings of many stocks, and although it is possible that the original pure stocks may have had specific anatomical characteristics and also specific mental characteristics, we find no linkage of these characteristics in their hereditary transmission after mixture. A remote ancestor of a certain man may have belonged to a stock which had long noses and also had violent dispositions; another remote ancestor may have belonged to another stock, having snub noses and great amiability. The man under consideration may, however, have inherited the long nose from the one stock and the amiable disposition from the other. This fact comes out most clearly in the blendings of the white and negro races. The features of the mulatto or the octoroon give no indication of the relative mental inheritance of the individual from his white and colored progenitors, although statistically the greater the proportion of white ancestry, the greater may be the probability of white intelligence.

It is possible, although not probable, that our feeble-minded whites inherit their mental defect from certain original pure stocks of low mentality which unfortunately became mixed with the other European stocks, but there are no anatomical signs by which the feeble-minded may be identified. Nor are there any anatomical signs of the criminal, Lombroso to the contrary notwithstanding.

It is true that there are certain exceptions to the generalizations I have made. Cretins, microcephalic and macrocephalic individuals and other distinctly pathological cases show anatomical signs of their mental deficiencies. So does a blind man show that he is deficient in the visual faculty and the legless man show his deficiency in the faculty of locomotion. But these cases are due to specific defects, and have no bearing on the attempts to analyze and classify the common run of humanity. These pathological cases may be easily segregated, and character analysis contributes nothing to our identification of them. In the remaining bulk of the population there is no discernible principle of linkage of the mental and the anatomical.

Finding no scientific basis for the anatomical character analysis, we are now thrown back upon the pragmatic problem. How is it that these systems apparently succeed? And we must admit that they do have at least financial success, for many of the character analysts are making money from their practice on commercial and industrial concerns.

For this success there are two outstanding reasons: first, the actual value of character readings is rarely checked up; second, a few, not many, of the professional analysts, when subjected to actual tests, can make surprisingly good guesses.

As an illustration of the way in which character reading may obtain the prestige of success without being checked up in regard to its accuracy, I may cite the case of a large industrial plant, in which several thousand employees were "analyzed" by a reputed "expert" at a good round price. This expert had a system devised by himself after the usual type, and apparently drawn either directly or indirectly from the older system from which my illustrations were taken and from which many other popular systems are drawn. This self-styled expert told me that in his opinion the systems of several other and better known fakers, whom he named, were defective because they were too rigid. "Now I," he went on to say, "have used in my system all that is worth while in psychology, phrenology and physiology; but I am not hide-bound like the others. When I find a case to which the system doesn't apply, I discard the system and use common sense.'' This expert spent several minutes in interviewing each employee, marking on a form card the characteristics of eyes, mouth, ears, hair, head form, etc. Then, combining these records, he decided upon the general mental and moral characteristics of the individual, and upon the particular line of work, if any, in the plant at which he should be put.

The ''experting'' of these employees was done at the instance of one of the directors of the corporation who had become interested in this sort of ''efficiency'' through the ''success'' obtained by it in certain other corporations. By the time the analyses were completed, this director had lost interest in this particular fad, and had become interested in another kind of ''efficiency.'' The results were, of course, pigeonholed; the managers and foremen who were actually working with the employees knew too much to use the readings. But the ''expert'' went on to the next job with thousands of dollars in his pocket, and with the reputation of having successfully ''experted'' this corporation, whose directors, being cold, hard business men, obviously would not have put money in the scheme unless it were financially profitable. This corporation, of course, had been influenced by similar considerations. Other concerns had their employees ''experted'' ''successfully,'' the success having been of the same imaginary sort.

''Success'' under the conditions of an actual check up is another matter, and it is said that certain ''experts'' have, under test conditions, achieved a surprising measure of success. Such tests are made by submitting to the inspection of the ''expert'' a number of individuals of known and proven capacity in various lines, but who are unknown to the ''expert.'' The ''expert'' is then required to make a written statement as to the mental characteristics of each person, and these statements are compared with previously prepared statements based on the established characteristics of the test-persons.

Now I can not guarantee that any such tests have actually been successful. I have to restrict my statement to the form ''it is said.'' There are, of course, many chances of erroneous conclusions when the tests are not made under the rigid supervision of psychologists. We know from the alleged proofs of telepathy and of various forms of spirit manifestations that unskilled investigators commonly overlook the most vital points in the test conditions, because they do not know their importance. The records on most tests of this sort have a value of approximately zero, because they contain no reliable evidence on the vital points, however much detailed information is given on other points.

But suppose we assume (although we may have as yet no good grounds for the assumption) that tests of certain character-analysts have given positive results. This would not be surprising. In fact, I should expect to find that some "experts" could produce positive results. Few "experts" are willing to submit to real tests, but those few who are willing must be so because they are confident that they could succeed to some extent, even in a carefully checked test.

We may freely admit that certain persons, working in entire independence of any system, may be able to make some good guesses. Many of us think that we can make good guesses. Our guesses are probably very much less accurate than we suppose, yet they may have some validity. In many cases we have to entrust important matters to individuals as to whose honesty or intelligence we have no evidence except from our guesses based on brief observation of the visible appearance of the individual. There is no reason to suppose that professional character analysts should not be able to make as good guesses as any one else, provided these experts have the requisite native capacity, and provided that, like the one I quoted, they ignore their systems and use common sense.

It is actually a fact that we do make correct judgments about the transient mental processes of other persons without being able to identify the facts on which these judgments are based. If you are talking to some one, and you say something which offends or grieves or pleases him, you may recognize that fact at once, although it may be impossible for you to designate the exact change in his face or voice or posture which is the basis of your idea. You may even make similar judgments when carrying on a conversation over the telephone, in which case changes in the timbre and inflections of the voice alone could give you the clue. You know from the other person's voice that he is offended or pleased, although you may not be able to identify the exact change in his voice which is the important factor. When you have the visual clues from the other person's face, as well as the clues from his voice, your judgments are more definite and more secure.

This whole matter is but a special case of the more general phenomenon of perception and judgment by sign. It is a fact that in much of our perception we perceive meanings without perceiving the signs on which the perception is based. In some cases, the signs could be perceived, if attention were drawn to them; in other cases, the signs can not be discriminated even under the best conditions. I shall not go into this topic in an extended way, both because it is familiar to psychologists, and because it can not be briefly expounded to those without psychological training. I mention it only to show that on this point of character readings we are not dealing with a unique phenomenon, but with a particular manifestation of a general principle which runs broadly through our mental life.

As another illustration of the general principle, I may refer to certain cases of supposed "thought-reading" which are really cases of sign-reading. Many amateurs succeed in catching ideas from other persons, where there is physical relation of such sort that movements of the second person may actually stimulate receptors of the first person, either tactually, visually or acoustically. But these amateurs never succeed if they watch for the signs. They succeed only when they ignore the signs and attend to the meanings. In fact, if amateurs who succeed brilliantly in muscle reading tests become convinced that their performance really is muscle reading and nothing more occult, they can usually do the trick no longer, and this is precisely what we might expect. Similarly, if, instead of watching to see whether the person you are talking to is pleased or not, you watch for the facial changes which indicate pleasure, you will not catch his emotional changes unless the symptoms are extremely gross. The conditions here are not greatly different from those obtaining in the visual perception of depth, where, if you attend to the signs, convergence, accommodation, binocular disparity, and so on, you will lose the depth-effect which those signs would give if they were not attended to.

The important question, therefore, is: What are the signs which tell us something about the mental characteristics of other persons? In the case of fleeting, ideational and emotional changes, these signs are obviously not anatomical; and in the case of fundamental tendencies of mental and moral sorts, we have already shown that there are no known anatomical signs. We are, therefore, forced to the conclusion that in the one case as in the other, the signs are physiological. Changes in the complicated muscular system of the face do occur along with ideas, especially if these ideas are emotionally toned. Changes in the complex musculature of the vocal organs and changes in the arm, leg and trunk muscles also occur. There are, in other words, changes in voice, in features, in posture and in other bodily postures and movements which are perfectly competent to serve as indexes of ideational and emotional changes. Unfortunately, we have not yet succeeded in analyzing more than the most gross of these signs.

Fundamental tendencies in ideational and emotional reaction give rise to habitual modes of expression of the various sorts. Habitual modes of expression, moreover, leave their traces, especially in the face, even when the actual expression is not occurring.

There would seem to be, therefore, a complex system of signs, not only of fleeting mental changes, but signs also of character traits, provided we can make use of them.

Signs of this sort are effective, prior to analysis. Habits of perception and of judgment are built up on signs, without necessitating any analysis or identification of such signs. Moreover, the development of the capacity to catch meanings in this way, if it be possible, depends upon native capacity as well as upon practice. We should, therefore, expect to find exactly what we do find, namely, that there is great individual variation in this apparent skill, and that in the absence of a really comprehensive and accurate analysis of signs, the attempt to attend to signs is a disturbing factor.

Character analysts, if successful under real test conditions, obviously make their guesses just as you or I do. "The systems" can be nothing but obstacles, since they have no real bearing on the problem. But, after having made a guess, the analyst can readily find in his system details which back up his guess, provided the system is elastic, depending upon sign patterns rather than upon hard and fast single signs. We need not assume that successful character analysts, if there are such, go through this sophistical process deliberately. The tendency to construe evidence to suit one's theory, and to recognize the data which may thus be construed, overlooking conflicting data, is too well known and too widespread to need demonstration. One of the important reasons why scientific procedure and scientific methods are necessary is that such procedure and methods are indispensable helps to the avoidance of arbitrary inferences, and even with the best of scientific aids the tendency will sometimes operate.

As a matter of fact, there is no reason to believe that the accuracy and reliability of such guesses as you and I and the character analyst make are very high. But there is reason to believe that if any character analyst does obtain even ten per cent. of accuracy in certain special test cases, he very likely may not know how he gets his results, and may believe that he is getting them through his system, although he really is not.

I have no doubt that those mind-readers, such as Bishop and McIvor-Tyndall, who apparently attained striking results under test conditions, sincerely believed that they were reading minds directly, and not through physical signs. Certainly, they could obtain those results only by ignoring the signs, and it may well be that they would not have been successful if they had known the actual nature of the process. I may mention here the observation I have made that the most successful hypnotists are those who have no scientific comprehension of the hypnotic process, but who really believe that they are exercising an occult power, or that some ''magnetic fluid'' flows from their hands to the patient.

On the other hand, it is true that we do, in much of our perception and thought, make use of signs effectively, although we are fully aware of the nature of those signs. In visual depth perception, to which I have already referred, we lose nothing in the perception of depth in pictures and landscapes through an exact knowledge of the signs, provided we do not attempt to attend to those signs in the moment of perception. As another pertinent illustration I may point out that the knowledge that the thinking-process proceeds through muscular signs does not interfere with the vividness and the efficiency of thinking, provided we do not attempt to attend to those signs while thinking.

It is therefore entirely possible that a scientific system of character measurement may some day be developed. Such a system would be based on physiological, not on anatomical signs, and would necessarily be the result of extensive and prolonged experimental work. Even the development of such a system to the point of such relative efficiency as has been reached in mental measurements would require years of work by many and highly trained investigators, just as the development of mental measurements has required.

Although we do not know that it is possible to develop a science of character estimation, serious work in the attempt to find out is highly desirable. Even a definite negative result would be most valuable. In the meantime, a respectable name by which this field of investigation might be known would be practically useful. The term ''analysis'' and its derivatives can no longer be used in psychology, because, thanks to the efforts of the ''psycho-analysts'' and the ''character-analysts,'' the terms ''analysis'' and ''analyst'' have come to connote superstition and quackery. In the meantime, in the interests of the gullible public as well as the interests of psychology, both pure and applied, we must carry on an educational campaign against ''character analysis.''